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The lived experiences of food insecurity within the context of poverty in Hamilton, New Zealand.

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This thesis is dedicated to Bobbie Wills,

For whom the respect and dignity of all people was always paramount

"For I was hungry and you fed me..."

Abstract

Aotearoa/New Zealand is seeing increasing levels of hardship amongst the citizenry. Such developments can be traced to the implementation of neoliberal-based policies and the retrenchment of state-sponsored welfare and associated social safety nets. Food insecurity is central to experiences of hardship. This thesis explores food insecurity as a symptom of broader neoliberal reforms. In particular, this thesis considers the ways in which experiences of food insecurity within the context of material deprivation affect everyday food-related practice. To examine these processes, I took an ethnographically oriented, immersive research approach. Specifically, I attended a community meal for fifteen months and became involved in preparing food, engaging with various people in conversation, taking field notes from direct observations, and writing fundraising applications to support the meal. From the meal I established trust with diners to the point that I could recruit seven people from five households to participate in further aspects of this study. These seven participants were engaged through a series of emplaced interactions regarding the ways in which they source and prepare food for themselves and their respective households. Taken together, my engagements with meal attendees alongside participant interviews supported by go-along and visual techniques enabled me to build up a detailed picture of experiences of food insecurity. Through taking an analytical approach based on the researcher-as-bricoleur, my interpretive endeavours examine aspects of hardship, agency, making-do, and hegemonic silencing as they play out in the everyday lives of participants. This thesis is presented in four publications. The first publication critiques the nutritionistic, deficit-orientated literature on community meal provision. In response I offer an alternative approach that emphasizes food as a social determinant of health. In doing so I argue for moving food insecurity research beyond considerations of individual behaviours and lifestyles as primary influences on food choices. In the second publication I spatialize the community meal and surrounding activities. Particular attention is given to the way in which the provision of a meal in a humanizing and dignifying way works to provide an enclave of care for meal attendees. This enclave of care fosters agency, solidarity, and a sense of community, which in turn helps to counteract the internalized distress of poverty. The third publication draws from a series of emplaced interviews, including photo-elicitation and supermarket 'shop-along' excursions with five families across four households. Participants detail the ways in which they respond to hardship and navigate precarious foodscapes to procure resources and food for themselves and their families. Ongoing food insecurity sees these householders utilize practices of passing and food

rationing in order to circumvent the shame and moral accusations associated with poverty. In the fourth publication I present an in-depth case study of one household, the Kopa family. Through social practices such as tactical supermarket shopping, accessing charitable food grants, sharing surplus food items and distributing food-provisioning tasks, the Kopa family is able to provide a variety of dishes to eat despite limited resources. By detailing their strategies for survival, I facilitate a deeper understanding of the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions of hardship. The mimetic nature of their accounts highlights the need for research methods that are sensitive to the ways in which poverty and food insecurity are invoked and inferred rather than addressing directly. In conclusion, food insecurity shapes people's social practices surrounding the procurement, consumption, and sharing of food. Dominant neoliberal narratives work in concert with hegemonic shaming to silence everyday lived experiences of poverty and hardship. We can address food insecurity by implementing policies that address the underlying drivers of poverty and which prioritize citizen's well-being. Crucial to this is the cultivation of non-stigmatizing public narratives regarding hardship.

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